THE ARDENT BLASPHEMERS By Ray Bradbury, 1962

CONSIDER AMERICA, first of all the new breed of nations. Consider America, a nation, because of its newness, ardent in its blasphemy.

Set in motion by the centrifuge of the great wheel of the Industrial Revolution, this people flung themselves across sea prairies to stand on New England rim-rock and fling themselves yet on across land prairies. Shocking other ages, they blasphemed down the meadows and over hills as ancient as the memory of Jerusalem.

Consider America, her fire-dragon locomotives huffing out vast devil bursts of flueming spark, setting the lion-grass afire as they went.

Come to a forest, cut it down. Come to a mountain, quarry it to pebbles. Skip the pebbles across God's lakes. Build new mountains, finally, upright, and ornamented with man's prideful encrustations. Then run men up and down elevator shafts to a heaven no longer believed in from a hell much better ignored.

Consider the authors who lived in and with these men and wrote to channel this blasphemy, express it in symbols about which such men could enthuse like devil children. With a new nation being dreamt to life, set to rights with fabulous new toys, the uneasy dreamers cast about and came up with two most ardent blasphemers:

Herman Melville.

Jules Verne.

“American” authors, both.

Melville, the New Englander, and Verne, the Frenchman, you say, Americans both?

“American” yes in their newness and their attack upon the universe and this world rolling through that universe.

Another nation could have been “American” first. The seeds of man's mechanical reaction to Nature were cast forth first in England and France. But the flowering of what other ages might have considered an insidious tree was in this raw nation under God which would soon ask Him to move over, jump aside, step down. We might not even ask "His" pardon while we scourged the mineral gut, packed once-holy echoes in electronic boxes to deal them forth commercially, split atoms as handily as peas, and dared God to answer back in equal thunders.

I say, another nation could have done this. But the accidents of time and circumstance dubbed us unholy first. Others follow us in our sacrilege: the

Japanese and his insect-clicking camera, the Frenchman flung about by our L.P. jive, the Italian hopping Rome's hills on angry adaptations of our motorbikes.

The sacrilege was inevitable.

Once set the wheel invented by some fine fool of a first blasphemer in motion just beyond old Egypt, and it rolls up in the late 80s of our time such dust clouds as would dim the bright visage of any spoiled God. Wheels within wheels within wheels rolled forth upon our land and, later, way in the middle of our outraged God's air.

And being firstest with the mostest, we not only did but read, and having read did more.

And Jules Verne was our text and testament, followed close by packs of “evil” boys like Tom Swift and his Flying Machine plus his A.C. D.C. I.B.M. Power-Circuited Grandmother.

I Sing the Body Electric! cried Whitman.

And Americans wound tight their robot devices and set them free to gnaw ugliness across the territories which now, very late, we must clean up after.

But let us go back to our literary beginnings.

Why, in introducing you to this book by Jules Verne, do I summon forth the lunar name of Herman Melville? What relation do I see between a Frenchman benevolent as a good uncle in his eccentricities, and strange cousin Herman who some thought best kept in America's attic?

From the viewpoint of Gothic times peering ahead at the tidal wave of the future, let me set up these two men.

God, after all, was in His heaven a long while, and things went well for Him, if not His children, upon earth. Those born-but-to-die in habited His churches and if they questioned, questions were best kept mum in one's mouth, or like chewing gum behind the ear.

But send these God-doting children free from Europe, strew and scrabble them across a whole continental surprise, hand them commotions and contraptions of steam and whiffling iron and they pant up frenzies of revenge against God, for having maltreated them down the eons.

Out of questions suddenly posed and needs suddenly found most needful, as the steam blew off and the proud dust settled we found:

Mad Captain Ahab.

Mad Captain Nemo.

Moby Dick, the great White Whale.

Nautilus, the whale-seeming submarine, first of its hidden and terrific sort, soaring through sea-meadows amongst sinner sharks and true leviathans.

Look how these two “evil” men implement their “blasphemy.” “Call me Ishmael.” So Melville strikes forth on his search for Moby Dick. In his first chapter we find, quote.

“… Why upon your first voyage as a passenger, did you yourself feel such a mystical vibration, when first told that you and your ship were now out of sight of land? Why did the old Persians hold the sea holy? Why did the Greeks give it a separate deity, and own brother of Jove? Surely all this is not without meaning. And still deeper the meaning of that story of Narcissus, who because he could not grasp the tormenting, mild image he saw in the fountain, plunged into it and was drowned. But that same image, we ourselves see in all rivers and oceans. It is the image of the ungraspable phantom of life; and this is the key to it all.”

End quote. Why does Ishmael go to sea? Quote.

“… Chief among these motives was the overwhelming idea of the great whale himself. Such a portentous and mysterious monster roused all my curiosity. Then the wild and distant seas where he rolled his island bulk; the undeliverable, nameless perils of the whale; these, with all the attending marvels of a thousand Patagonian sights and sounds, helped to sway me to my wish. . . by reason of these things, then, the whaling voyage was welcome; the great flood-gates of the wonder-world swung open, and in the wild conceits that swayed me to my purpose, two and two there floated into my inmost soul, endless processions of the whale, and, mid most of them all, one grand hooded phantom, like a snow hill in the air. End quote.

In 20,000 Leagues Under the Sea, Jules Verne starts thus, quote.

“The year 1866 was marked by a strange event, an unexplainable occurrence which is undoubtedly still fresh in everyone's memory. … Several ships had recently met at sea ‘an enormous thing,' a long slender object which was sometimes phosphorescent and which was in finitely larger and faster than a whale.”

“The facts concerning this apparition, agreed closely with one another as to the structure of the object or creature in question, the incredible speed of its movements, the surprising power of its locomotion and the strange life with which it seemed endowed. If it was a member of the whale family, it was larger than any so far classified by scientists… But it did exist. there was no denying this fact any longer. and considering the natural inclination of the human brain

toward objects of wonder, one can understand the excitement produced throughout the world by this supernatural apparition.”

End quote. So two books begin. Both set somewhat the same tone, both strike chords that might recur within the framework of the book to follow. Yet swiftly we perceive rank differences. We soon know that while Uncle Jules is mostly gently mad, cousin Herman is beyond the pale.

We set sail with Ishmael who, unknowing, is in the clutches of wild Ahab, seeking some universal truth shaped to a monster all frightful white named Moby Dick.

We set sail almost simultaneously with Professor Aronnax and Ned Land and Conseil on the Abraham Lincoln in search of this other mystery which “in every big city... became the fashion: it was sung about in cafes, derided in newspapers and discussed on the stage. Scandal sheets had a marvelous opportunity to print all kinds of wild stories. Even ordinary newspapers. always short of copy. printed articles about every huge, imaginary monster one could think of, from the white whale, the terrible ‘Moby Dick’ of the far north, to the legendary Norse kraken. ...”

So we suspect that Uncle Jules has touched minds somewhere down the line with Cousin Herman.

But without any real exchange or super blending of madness.

Mr. Verne will go his own way with his “educated” vengeance, leaving Melville with his Shakespearean terrors and laments. We do not meet Moby Dick face to face, we only have Ahab's leg torn off in retrospect, until very late in Melville.

But Verne, in Chapter 6 of twenty thousand leagues, heaves his “monster” to view and swallows our Jonahs whole and entire.

Thus ending the tale as Melville might end it?

No, thus starting to show us the vast differences between the odd American-type French writer and the truly driven New England author-sailor soon to be despairing customs inspector.

Let us compare some few quotes from each writer. Here are some from Moby Dick:

“His three boats stove around him, and oars and men both whirling in the eddies; one captain, seizing the line-knife from his broken prow, had dashed at the Whale. . . . That Captain was Ahab. . .. And then it was, that suddenly sweeping his sickle-shaped lower jaw be neath him, Moby Dick had reaped away Ahab's leg, as a mower a blade of grass in the field. No turbaned Turk, no hired Venetian or Malay, could have smote him with more seeming malice. Ever since that almost fatal encounter, Ahab had cherished a wild vindictiveness against the

whale, all the more fell for that in his frantic morbidness he at last came to identify with him, not only all his bodily woes, but all his intellectual and spiritual exasperations. The White Whale swam before him as the monomaniac incarnation of all those malicious agencies which some deep men feel eating in them, till they are left living on with half a heart and half a lung. All that most maddens and torments; all that stirs up the lees of things; all truth with malice in it; all that cracks the sinews and cakes the brain; all the subtle demonisms of life and thought; all evil, to crazy Ahab, were visibly personified, and made practically assailable in Moby Dick. He piled upon the whale's white hump the sum of all the general rage and hate felt by his whole race from Adam down; and then, as if his chest had been a mortar, he burst his hot heart's shell upon it."

Also, Ahab, speaking to Starbuck:

"Hark ye yet again,. the little lower layer. All visible objects, man, are but as pasteboard masks. But in each event. in the living act, the undoubted deed. there, some unknown but still reasoning thing puts forth the moldings of its features from behind the unreasoning mask. If man will strike, strike through the mask! How can the prisoner reach outside except by thrusting through the wall? To me, the white whale is that wall, shoved near to me. Sometimes I think there's naught beyond. But 'tis enough. He tasks me; he heaps me; I see in him outrageous strength, with an inscrutable malice sinewing it. That inscrutable thing is chiefly what I hate; and be the white whale agent, or be the white whale principal, I will wreak that hate upon him. Talk not to me of blasphemy, man: I'd strike the sun if it insulted me."

Compare the above with these quotes from Verne's somewhat more differently "touched" Nemo:

"Professor .. . I'm not what you would call a civilized man. I've broken with all of society for reasons which I alone can appreciate. I therefore don't obey its rules, and I advise you never to refer to them again in front of me!"

Aronnax asks Nemo: "You love the sea, don't you, Captain?"

"Yes, I love it! The sea is everything. It covers seven-tenths of the globe. Its breath is pure and healthy. It is an immense desert where a man is never alone, for he can feel life quivering all about him. The sea is only a receptacle for all the prodigious, supernatural things that exist inside it; it is only movement and love; it is the living infinite, as one of your poets has said. And in fact, Professor, it contains the three kingdoms of nature. mineral, vegetable, and animal. This last is well represented by the four groups of zoophytes, by the three classes of articulata, by the five classes of mollusks, by three classes of vertebrates, mammals and reptiles, and those innumerable legions of fish, that infinite order of animals which includes more than thirteen thousand species, only one-tenth of which live in fresh wa ter. The sea is a vast reservoir of nature. The world, so to speak, began with the sea, and who knows but that it will also end in the sea! There lies supreme tranquility. The sea does not belong to tyrants. On its surface,

they can still exercise their iniquitous rights, fighting, destroying one another and indulging in their other earthly horrors. But thirty feet below its surface their power ceases, their influence dies out and their domination disappears! Ah, Monsieur, one must live. live within the ocean! Only there can one be independent! Only there do I have no masters! There I am free!”

How different that is from Melville's,

“When beholding the tranquil beauty and brilliancy of the ocean's skin, one forgets the tiger heart that pants beneath it; and would not willingly remember that this velvet paw but conceals a remorseless fang.”

And, in a tranquil, golden moment, Starbuck muses:

“Loveliness unfathomable, as ever lover saw in his young bride's eye. Tell me not of thy teeth-tiered sharks, and thy kidnapping cannibal ways. Let faith oust fact; let fancy oust memory; I look deep down and do believe.”

But Ahab will have none of it. He rejects what Nemo gladly accepts. The sea, with all its terror fleshed in beauty, is preferred by Nemo. Here ignorant hunters hunt from hunger. Above, intelligent men, sated at feasts, hunt from needs best not thought on save in nightmares of sadism and wanton destruction. To kill with the teeth is one thing. To kill with the hand, connected to the heart and thinking brain, is quite another.

“Strike through the mask!” cries Ahab.

Better than that, Nemo might reply in an imaginary rebuttal, I will build behind the mask, I will inhabit the white whale. After a shocked silence, Nemo might continue something like this:

I will create me a symbol of the deep, a manifestation of God's huge wonders, submersible, long-ranging, capably destructive, submissive to my commands, and I will course ocean seas in same, to spread a more personal and therefore more constructive terror in the world. I will not run after Moby Dick. I will rear him whole and entire and live in his belly and be the Mystery, myself.

So, in sum, Nemo skins together and rivets tight the very symbol most feared and whispered of by Ahab's mind and Ahab's crew. Casting aside any doubts, precluding any inhibitions, Nemo intrudes to the monster's marrow, dis inhabits mysticism, evicts terrors like so much trash, and proceeds to police the universe beneath, setting it to rights, harvesting its strange crops, be they animal, vegetable, or mineral-gold from sunken fool's ships to be distributed to the world's needy.

In this we find then that Verne is less blasphemous than Melville. He does not so much try to find and kill God in His lounging room as set His miraculous kitchen to percolating in synchronous, perceivable, and therefore serenity-inducing

rhythms. Given choices, Melville's Ahab would blow up the Clock Tower. Verne's Nemo would collect the exploded parts, put the whole back better than new and ask the world's citizens to tell their lives by it, be on time for one another from now on.

Verne accepts the natural world and would ask all men to accept its secret ways and join in making themselves over nearer to the hidden heart of this secret so as to utilize it, channel it, reconstruct it where necessary, to give man extra years and vitality. Melville cannot accept and with Ahab rages at the blind maunderings of a God he cannot comprehend. Ah, well, says Verne, let us work, let us think, then let us work again until we sweat. We shall win through, or die trying. No, says Melville, we cannot win. And vainly thrusts the harpoon to deflate the God-symboled Whale. Verne cares less about killing the symbol, more of rendering the Leviathan out for oil to light the flickerful lamps of a thinking world. Thinking maddens Ahab. Thinking only half-maddens Nemo; more often enlivens and solves problems for him and others who inhabit Verne's literary worlds. Ahab is mad at the God-universe. Nemo, more practically, is mad at man himself for not using his gift of brains.

Ahab, being irrationally disturbed at the Invisible, can do little.

Nemo, being distressed at God's children, has at least somewhere to start, material to work with, evil and good men to choose among, dirt to be swept out of corners and from under rugs.

Ahab, in trying to search everywhere, finds nothing.

Nemo, content with good beginnings, looks no further than the next man, and scans his face to guess his dream, and if the dream be bad, there is always the ocean depth to live in, gathering yet richer harvests whereby to relieve the oppressed.

So in the long journey through Moby Dick we follow Ahab, knighted by the whale who did so by tearing him asunder, and wearing his terrible crown of now self-inflicted thorns, self-appointing himself to a tragic end.

We wonder what Nemo would have thought of all this?

Glancing in from the kitchen where he might be busy serving forth foods to button up men's souls and sluice their veins with revivifying wonder, Nemo might well debate who that demented sea-king was, unnecessarily throwing and dragging himself about the throne room. We could well imagine Nemo hurrying in to offer a bracing hot drink, or finally slapping Ahab once across the face, seizing his shoulders to shake him, at last, and tell him to behave.

Faced with similar cataclysms we know Ahab would go down with his ship, shaking his fists at Fate.

While Nemo would vanish beneath the sea still bailing out water with his cupped hands. Ahab's ship pursues an unpursuable God, crying out against His characteristically ill behavior. Nemo's ship pursues men to remind them of their wickedness, to improve it, or be sunk. Ahab's ship moves most of the time in nightmare.

Nemo's moves in kaleidoscopic wonders, in rainbow beauties of life thrown forth in multitudinous displays. Only man is nightmare, and Nemo has a better dream to give him as anodyne.

Moby Dick rams Ahab's Pequod because that ship is the engine of blasphemy, directed at the Mystery. Nemo's Nautilus rams naval ships because they blaspheme against the better and best spirit of humankind. In the long history of the world, God's motto was writ on man's brow this way:

Yours not to reason why,

Yours to be born and die.

So Melville's Whale resents inquiry.

But Verne's Nautilus is the machine of curiosity, erasing the above motto, prolonging a searchful blasphemy into construction and jig sawing the grand puzzle into a whole.

Ahab orders God to reform Himself in a better image.

Nemo asks mankind to reform in cleaner, higher-spirited, well-mannered ranks. Both men, being reformers, inevitably destroy for their purposes.

Ahab takes all with him to the sea-bottom in his Shakespearean frenzy.

Nemo, less mad, like many reformers nevertheless winds up killing men to make them behave. Death instructs people well in peace, and by the time he is done, Nemo has killed just as surely as if his aims had been bad.

The sea closes over both men.

But Ahab dead is doomed just as he was doomed alive.

While hope lives on after Nemo, when, either through remorse or inadvertency, he puts his ship down into the Maelstrom. We are unsure of his death.

On the last page of his book, Verne offers us this thought:

“If the Nautilus has survived, and if Captain Nemo still inhabits the ocean, the country of his adoption. Then may the hatred be appeased in his savage heart! May the contemplation of so many wonders extinguish in him the spirit of

revenge! May the judge disappear and the scientist continue his peaceful exploration of the seas! However strange his destiny may be, it is also sublime!”

And in that sublimity lies hope for Nemo and his American nephews, the boys who have grown to manhood and machinery since.

For Ahab the hope would be meaningless. If by some miracle Melville's madman should open his cold eyes at the sea-bottom, the contemplation of Verne's rainbow wonders would but drive him deeper into his own abyss. Melville's maelstrom, sucking down through the gorge of Ahab's soul, could swallow Verne's toy Nautilus whole.

But swallow it, it never will.

For what we have examined here are two ways of looking at the world. Ages alternate with doses of despair and tonics of survival. Some ages balance between. We are given choices. Some ages do not choose, and thus lose ground in the great vote-taking of time and the deliverance of power either into or out of their hands.

One hundred years ago, this Yea-sayer and this Nay-sayer, literarily anyway, offered us the choice of the nodded or the shaken head. Separated by thousands of sea-miles, yet cheek-by-jowl, these authors represented two halves of the newly emergent American attitude toward the world, and debated whether to live under nature's thunderbolts and rainstorms; accept, tolerate, as all had done before.

One decided to give God as good as he got, and stormed heaven as if it were hell.

The other favored pacing God, running at His elbow, recharging man's batteries, using His juice, so as to later circumvent Him with newer, brighter machineries of sacrilege. These devices saved men's lives when God said die, they reared sick men tall whilst God said fall down dead, lie cold.

And now that we are well into this age of electronics and have begun to worry about how to let some new kind of God-concept back in through even so much as a side-door, we shall witness the pendulum swing, quite often, between Ahab and Nemo. On successive days we may feel both tempted to utter destruction or utter mechanical creativity or combinations and variations on both.

If I assay right, we in America are just emerging from a period inclining toward the Melvillean. We are tempted to hurl our sick heart into God's face.

But I think instead we should listen to the good and reassuring beat of the circuiting mechanical pump in our hospitals, where man's salt blood bypasses his failing heart to be aerated and returned to his waiting and hopeful body. The medical machines of our time, throbbing, would have seemed music to Verne.

They calm the ravening intellect that would run too fast to change the world, perhaps by disaster.

The world will change, at any rate, through outright fury, neglect, or through the mild but dedicated blasphemy of such as Nemo. Ahab might explode a hydrogen bomb to shake the foundations of God.

But in the fright-flash of illumination, at some distance, we would see Nemo re-perusing notes made in mathematical symbols to use such energy to send men to the stars rather than scatter them in green milk-glass and radioactive chaff along the shore.

These then are the captains of our American soul. We could choose between them, if we wished, as tomorrow's light comes in the window.

Decide that God has joined the universe with warped and spokeless wheels and so take Melville and invite the Abyss. Decide that man's architecture is in sore need of retrials and testings, and so put in with Mr. Verne.

The latter might be our greatest temptation, for we have always resembled Nemo rather more than Ahab.

We have always been the American Boy Mechanic, his cellar full of home-made helicopters, his attic chocked with canvas batwings, an unfinished rowboat in the basement, a bicycle-built-for-two-hovercraft in the yard.

America was ingenuity. It still is and could be. Spit, string, and tinfoil once our girded armor and the grand dream our goal, we have too often now folded our money into our pockets and strolled off while Doom bided its time and whetted its whistle around the corner.

So surprisingly enough, the book you hold in your hands is more than timely, as are all of Verne's books. Remarkable not so much for what he predicted, and he predicted much. gave bones to boys on which to skin their dreams. but because of its attitude. American in the best sense, that we can somehow make-do somewhere, anywhere, if we collect our spit, save our string, and ball our tinfoil.

Melville wrote to Hawthorne of Moby Dick: “I have written an evil book.”

Similarly, seen from other days and ways, Verne might have written some literary friend that yesterday's evil can be hammered into today's good, yesterday's provocation to morality can be rechanneled toward survival in tomorrow.

The logic that informs Ahab's madness but destroys him.

The logic that informs Nemo can well build us homes on far planets circling more safely placed suns. Like Nemo we may well find we need not destroy the horrific whale of reality, we may lurk inside it with machineries, plotting our destinies

and going our terror-fraught ways toward an hour when we can lie under those stranger suns and bask easy and breathe light and know peace.

We will probably not choose between these writers, but carry both with us into the future. We will have need of one to question blind Matter and the other to cross-examine blind Man. Thus fused, we shall face the future with fortitude and stamina.

But before we move up in seas of space, the time is now to move sidewise and along and down through seas of water. Here then is Verne's Twenty Thousand Leagues Under that Sea, his “American” book, his book “moderne,” his particular sublime and mad captain, and his strange metal fish.

Portholes tight. Periscope down.

Prepare to submerge.